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The Use of L1 in L2 Classrooms in Japan: A Survey of University Student Preferences

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Abstract

This paper will outline the reasons for the current resurgence of literature that supports the use of learners' first language (L1) in the second or foreign language (L2) classroom. An outline of the ESL and EFL classroom environment, and an overview of the arguments for and against the use of L1 will be presented before the results of a survey of Japanese university students are presented, showing that even though many universities in Japan try to prohibit the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, learners are in support of dual language usage and find it beneficial to their learning journey.

I. Introduction

In the past few years, there has been a resurgence in literature supporting the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. It was generally described unfavourably in literature from the 1980s to the 1990s, being primarily viewed as detrimental to the language acquisition and learning processes of L2 learners. New theories include translanguaging, outlined by Garcia (2014): a developing concept in which the deliberate and systematic use of two languages is encouraged for education and learning purposes. Translanguaging effects, such as increased levels of understanding, comprehension and language use as outlined by Ringbom (2016) have started to influence the way that instructors are viewing the use of learners' L1 in L2 target language classroom contexts. This paper explores the theory of translanguaging and how its

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application can be of benefit to the acquisition and learning of the L2 in both ESL, and more so, EFL contexts.

Teaching practices that take place within Japanese university English language classroom contexts in particular were surveyed to outline how a sample of university student L2 learners felt about the extra support and comprehension that can be attained through the limited and select implementation of the L1 in the L2 classroom when comprehension, topic of study, level of language resource and interpersonal factors are explored. Furthermore, opinions and policy planning that have limited and in some cases discouraged the use of L1 in L2 classrooms have predominantly reflected the views of instructors and researchers, acting to disenfranchise stakeholders, and neglecting the opinions of the learner for whom the pedagogy exists. This paper presents data collected via surveys and focus group discussion from native Japanese speaking university student EFL learners and outlines their voices and opinions.

II. Background

1. Differentiating between ESL and EFL classrooms

The benefit of translanguaging and the use of L1 in L2 instruction contexts can be better observed in EFL classrooms than in ESL classrooms. To better understand why this is the case, a description of the differences between ESL and EFL classrooms is necessary.

The ESL classroom, or English as a Second Language classroom, is a class that takes place in an area where the L2, English, is the dominant language of the surrounding culture and society in which the student is located (Long, 2015). For example, this could be a high school class in Australia, where English is the national language, and where the students may come from countries or households in which English is not the predominant language (VanPatten, 2007). Because these classrooms usually include students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the use of translanguaging and the students' L1 in the classroom becomes difficult due to the number of different languages that may be used by students in the classroom. To take an ESL class taught recently in Australia as an example, the variety of L1's used by students in a single class included Spanish, Bahasa Indonesia, Chinese, Arabic, Korean and Italian. Since the teacher was not proficient in all of the languages used by students, translanguaging would not have been beneficial in this context. Use of students' L1 benefits a class only when the instructor is fluent in and familiar with all languages and cultures present in the class, which is unlikely in such a multilingual context (Duff, 2007).

The EFL classroom, or English as a Foreign Language classroom, is a class

that takes place in an environment where the L1 dominates in the learners' daily lives and where the L2 is a foreign language that is studied as a subject, not typically heard outside the classroom (DeBot, 2005). In this case, because a large portion of the learners are native speakers of the L1, and the remaining learners function in the L1 with high levels of competency and fluency, the L1 can be used in this L2 classroom to enhance the learners' understanding of linguistic, grammatical, and sociocultural aspects, along with the learning of the L2, leading to enhanced comprehension, learning, and acquisition. In the case of this study, all students surveyed are native and/or fluent Japanese speakers, who are studying the English language as a foreign language, and who have a number of instructors that are somewhat proficient in the learners' L1.

Understanding the different motivations of learners is also an important consideration for instructors when differentiating between teaching approaches in the ESL vs. EFL classroom. As outlined by Ford (2009):

Despite strong social, political, and indeed practical arguments for L1 use, caution is needed in simply applying principles of ESL critical pedagogy to EFL classroom contexts. For example, the motivation of an ESL learner who needs English to function in society on a day-to-day basis is likely to be very different to the motivation of an EFL student who is obliged to take an English credit regardless of interest or study major, as is the case at most Japanese universities (pp.64-65).

2. Past literature on the use of L1 in L2 classrooms

Recent studies investigating the use of L1 in L2 classrooms have been divided, with some researchers believing the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, and others believing that L1 exclusion classrooms are the optimum environment to facilitate improvement in students' language learning and acquisition. This difference of opinion is evident not only in the literature, but also within institutions of L2 instruction. In the context of native anglophone teachers working in non-English speaking areas, each teacher's differing proficiency in the L1 becomes a factor that influences the instructor's choice of approaching the classroom either monolingually or bilingually. For some, doubts regarding the teachers' proficiency in the local L1 become a motivating factor for the opinions held and expressed within the literature. Results from surveys of instructors' language abilities in EFL contexts has shown that those teachers proficient in the L1 of the country in which they are teaching seem to be more receptive to incorporating the L1 in their classrooms, and can further assist with the daily duties and responsibilities in the workplace that require language competence. Yet those teachers who are not competent in the L1 usually disagree.

Jadallah (2010) believes that this divide is caused by the instructors feeling that if they show the limitations of their language proficiency, that they may be viewed as inferior to those who can use the language.

3. Advantages of L1 usage in the classroom

Literature in support of the use of L1 in L2 classrooms has made a resurgence since 2000, with support focusing on the following factors. According to Macaro (2001), eliminating or regulating the use of L1 in L2 classrooms deprives students of a valuable learning and comprehension tool and can create an interpersonal barrier between teachers and students, but also hinders students' enthusiasm for enquiry and questioning.

Sharma (2006) argues that the use of L1 is of further benefit in the L2 classroom for language analysis, classroom management, presenting grammar rules, error feedback, and comprehension checking. Furthermore, as argued by Carroll (2005), for the promotion of both language acquisition and the introduction of social, cultural, political and historical concepts that are important to comprehend to be a fluent and appropriate participant in the L2, the use of L1 becomes a necessary tool to promote understanding, consideration, and comprehension of these important factors that are sometimes lost in monolingual classrooms.

Regarding learner motivation and identity in the classroom, Nazary (2008) suggests that "starting with the students' L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express and be themselves, which promotes 'self' to be present in the classroom." (pp.138-139).

4. Disadvantages of L1 usage in the classroom

Researchers and practitioners who are opposed to the use of L1 in L2 classrooms state a number of reasons that they believe that L1 usage should be limited or prohibited. First, as reported by Chambers (1991), some teachers believe that the use of L1 in the L2 classroom is contrary to the intentions of Krashen's notion of language acquisition. It is further believed by some that L2 acquisition occurs naturally, similar to the way that the mother tongue is acquired by children. In regard to classroom time constraints, Harbord (1992) suggests that the use of L1 in L2 classrooms is detrimental in that it reduces the available quantity of comprehensible L2 time. Finally, Miles (2004) suggests that if learners know that their teacher is proficient in their L1, that knowledge may stop students from attempting to use the L2 in situations where their level is pressed and communication becomes difficult, thus negatively impacting the learners' opportunities to challenge themselves.

5. Translanguaging

As a result of further research into the benefits of the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, the concept of Translanguaging was termed by Garcia and Wei (2014) and is defined as follows:

Translanguaging is a developing concept in which the deliberate and systematic use of two languages is encouraged for education and learning purposes. Translanguaging as an approach views all of the language in a speaker's linguistic repertoire as belonging to a single, integrated system, whereby speakers select and use the most suitable elements of a language for communicative use in a given context. Second language learners are not considered to be acquiring a new language, but adding the integrated linguistic system of which their first language is already a part. In second language learning, an important concept within a translanguaging approach is the idea that both learners' first and second languages are encouraged and utilised in the classroom for the purpose of developing the weaker target language. (pp.19~20).

This definition outlines the basic purpose of the use of translanguaging, in which both languages are seen as beneficial tools to the development of the less proficient L2, and further allows for the better transmission of information and concepts related to cultural differences that are evident between the societies in which the languages are spoken, thus further improving the overall comprehension of concepts not only important to the improvement of the target language, but also to understand the mannerisms, concepts and social constructs evident within the target language. Therefore, translanguaging is also seen as a method that is further encouraged to be used in a topic based learning environment. (Creese, 2010)

6. Balanced approach and required skills

Current shifts in the approach to language teaching have suggested that a balanced approach, rather than an English only approach, have had positive results within L2 English classrooms. Nation (2003) introduces another approach called the "Balanced Approach". He believes teachers need to show respect for learners' L1 and need to avoid doing things that make the L1 seem inferior to English, whilst at the same time reminding us that it is the English teacher's job to help learners develop their proficiency in English. In this case, a balanced approach is needed which sees a role for the L1 but also recognizes the importance of maximizing L2 use in the classroom. Miles (2004) supports the use of a bilingual approach and states the following limitations to the monolingual approach:

1. It is impractical,
2. Native teachers are not necessarily the best teachers and
3. Exposure alone is not sufficient for learning.

For translanguaging to be fully utilized, there are certain skillsets that are required. According to Hornberger (2012), an appropriate level of fluency in the language of the country that the instructor is located in is essential. For lower level classes, a lower level of ability is acceptable, but as students' levels rise, so too should the instructor's proficiency in the local language. A general recommendation is a +1 proficiency, in which the instructor should possess, at a bare minimum, proficiency in the students' L1 at least one level higher than the L2 level they are teaching their students. For those teachers who hold a local L1 level similar to their students' L2 level, the use of translanguaging, though beneficial, becomes hindered by the time it takes for the teacher to think about the appropriate response, which takes time away from guiding, instructing, and allowing students to communicate in the target language.

III. Methodology

Short answer questionnaires were given to 64 second year Japanese University students (N=64) who were enrolled in the School of Science and Technology at Kwansei Gakuin University in June 2017. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling as they were taught one of their three compulsory English subjects once a week by the researcher. Participants were asked to consider all three of their compulsory English language subjects when responding to whether they believed that the use of L1 (Japanese) in the L2 (English as a Foreign Language) classroom was a benefit or hindrance to their EFL journey.

For further clarification of participant responses, a thirty-minute focus group was also conducted at the end of June 2017, to allow students to express their opinions in further detail and to discover underlying reasons as to why participants responded to the questionnaires the way they did. Three students who took part in the study were either non-native fluent speakers of Japanese or Japanese students who had studied overseas and had undertaken more than a year of education in the English language.

IV. Results

Results showed that a clear majority of students felt that the use of L1 in their L2 classrooms was a benefit to their learning journey.

Q 1) Do you think that your teacher's Japanese (L1) language ability is a benefit to your English (L2) study?

| | | | |
|-----|----|----|---|
| Yes | 61 | No | 3 |
|-----|----|----|---|

Focus Group: Reasons provided by students were that they can attain information about grammar, culture and the topics being studied which assists in their comprehension and understanding of what is being taught. Three students stated that they would prefer an immersion approach based on their past experience of undertaking education in English in a native English-speaking country.

Q 2) Do you think it is easier to ask your teachers questions if you can ask them in Japanese (L1)?

| | | | |
|-----|----|----|---|
| Yes | 62 | No | 2 |
|-----|----|----|---|

Focus Group: Students who responded 'yes' stated that they felt more comfortable approaching the teacher with questions and queries which in some cases they may not be comfortable doing in the English (L2) language. 2 students stated that due to their English language ability being a higher level than their classmates', it did not make a difference to them.

Q 3) Do you think your opportunities to learn, use, comprehend or communicate in English (L2) are hindered by your teacher using Japanese (L1) in the classroom in specific circumstances, such as explaining grammar, going over the syllabus, explaining cultural concepts or summing up the lesson?

| | | | |
|-----|---|----|----|
| Yes | 0 | No | 64 |
|-----|---|----|----|

Focus Group: During the focus group discussions, all students, in a show of hands and in further conversations to attain further details, showed that they thought the use of L1 in the L2 classroom did not inhibit their L2 language learning, usage, and comprehension in any way. Participants expressed that the use of L1 in such circumstances as going over course requirements, explaining examinations and marking criteria, and summarising the key points of the class in the L1 was a benefit to further understanding and comprehending the class content, and allowed for students to relax more than they felt they could in classes where the L1 is not used by the teacher in these situations.

Q 4) As a student, do you feel more comfortable with a teacher who can use Japanese (L1) or a teacher who cannot use Japanese (L2 only classrooms)?

| | | | | | |
|------------------|----|---------------------|---|---------------------------|---|
| Can use Japanese | 61 | Cannot use Japanese | 1 | Doesn't make a difference | 2 |
|------------------|----|---------------------|---|---------------------------|---|

Focus Group: Results show that past experience with the English language is an indicating factor as to how students feel about the use of L1 in L2 classrooms. The majority of students who have not studied abroad and whose language study has taken place only in Japan feel that they are more comfortable with teachers who can use Japanese and find it beneficial to their learning journey. The one student who preferred a teacher who could not use Japanese is an individual who has studied English overseas and undertaken other subjects in the English language. The two participants who answered that it did not make a difference were non-native fluent speakers of Japanese. These international students collectively stated that they enjoyed listening to teachers use Japanese as it was a further opportunity to practice their Japanese along with their English.

Q 5) Do English (L2) classes that prohibit you using Japanese (L1) have an impact on your motivation, comprehension, or inquiry?

| | | | |
|-----|----|----|---|
| Yes | 61 | No | 3 |
|-----|----|----|---|

Focus Group: Views expressed by the 61 native Japanese speakers showed that if they are unable to use their L1 in the L2 classroom or with their classroom teacher, it can have an impact on them asking questions of and feeling comfortable with their teacher, and in some cases, have an impact on their motivation to study and on their participation levels in the English (L2) classroom. Reasons expressed by students ranged from feeling pressured to use language that they were not familiar with, being fearful of making mistakes, a lack of communicative ability regarding the area of inquiry and being policed by teachers for using Japanese. With further questioning about being policed, some students felt that if they used Japanese, some teachers would ignore them or make them repeat the inquiry in English, where the student did not possess the linguistic resources to do so, thus making students feel that their questioning was not important to the teacher and that the teacher was not concerned with their problem/ question/ inquiry.

Once again, students with a higher level of English language abilities felt that prohibiting Japanese in the English classroom was not an issue for them and didn't affect the way that they viewed their language learning and development as they were familiar and comfortable with the content and level of English being taught in the classroom.

V. Discussion

Results indicate a clear preference for the use of Japanese (L1) in EFL classrooms by the surveyed learners. Student opinions indicate that the opportunity to hear explanations of difficult language content and a summary of course requirements in Japanese allows for them to further comprehend and understand the language, course requirements and cultural concepts they encounter. Furthermore, students feel more comfortable when able to approach their teacher in Japanese when asking questions and reporting concerns / issues that arise throughout the semester.

The results contradict much of the literature reviewed here, and in some cases the policies manifest in workplace environments created by faculties in Japanese university environments, in many of which the predominant opinion is in favour of a monolingual classroom where the L1 is not encouraged or used. Results of this investigation show that teacher and student preferences are not aligned. Further studies investigating students' opinions and faculty discussions about each and every teacher's opinion of the use of L1 in L2 classrooms would be beneficial to creating programs that are of a high level both in regards to language ability and cultural concepts discussed, that also take students' learning preferences into consideration, which becomes vital to creating a learning environment that fosters the development of teacher pedagogy that is inclusive of students' learning preferences, would be indispensable.

VI. Conclusion

Current literature has established that the incorporation of L1 in the L2 classroom is making a resurgence due to the benefits that it can provide in both the teaching and acquisition of a language, as well as explaining procedure, requirements and cultural differences that may present themselves in the classroom.

Although literature and practice throughout the world is starting to favour L1 incorporation in EFL and language learning contexts, the spread of this practice is still in its early stages in Japan. Further studies with a wider group of participants from a variety of L1 mother tongues and cultures is essential to see where differences may occur based on the country, culture, and classroom in question. In the Japanese case, as outlined by Ford (2009), there is still a lack of support from faculty in regard to using L1 as a beneficial tool in the L2 classroom. Yet with further discussion, studies, and literature, it is possible that a curriculum and classroom environment that supports the use of the L1 as preferred by the learner, will become a mainstream approach when the main consideration amongst teachers should be how best to teach to their students' preferences and learning styles.

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